



2007

# The Effectiveness of the Press in Serving the Needs of American Democracy


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## Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Jamieson, K. H., Hardy, B. W., and Romer, D. (2007). "The Effectiveness of the Press in Serving the Needs of American Democracy" in K. H. Jamieson, (ed.), *Institutions of American Democracy: A Republic Divided* (pp. 21-51). New York, Oxford University Press.

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# The Effectiveness of the Press in Serving the Needs of American Democracy

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Organizational Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

## 2

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PRESS IN SERVING THE NEEDS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY



*Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Bruce W. Hardy, and Daniel Romer*

Thomas Jefferson was of two minds about the utility of reading newspapers. At one point he wrote, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”<sup>1</sup> At another, he complained to a friend, “The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them, inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer the truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors.”<sup>2</sup>

The newspapers to which Jefferson was referring in both instances were highly partisan, pervasively opinionated, and made little, if any, effort to accurately represent the views of the other sides on the controversies of the day. However, when each side had its own press, as was the case for the major political parties, there was in fact a clash of ideas between them even if most who could read consumed only the papers that reinforced their partisan pre-suppositions.

When the founders guaranteed freedom of the press, they did so in a world of partisan media filled with polemical pamphlets and political papers. As the journalism historians Michael Schudson and Susan Tifft note, during this time it was “more troublesome for printers to be neutral than to be partisan; nearly everyone felt compelled to take sides.”<sup>3</sup> It was not until the mid-twentieth century that the norms of objectivity, balance, fairness, and related ethics “became consolidated.”<sup>4</sup>

As implemented, these concepts meant that “journalists could claim to be ‘neutral’ simply by proclaiming to support neither of the political parties and to be ‘impartial’ by giving an equal amount of attention to both parties.”<sup>5</sup>

Jefferson’s conflicted views reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the partisan model. When advancing the case for the new nation, as the *Federalist Papers* did, for example, one can imagine the founder from Virginia and third president reflecting the first of the expressed sentiments. However, when he was the object of attack, as he was when Yale president Rev. Timothy Dwight took him on, one can imagine him thinking the second. Dwight’s aspersions included the notion that if Jefferson were elected, “the Bible will be burned, the French ‘Marseillaise’ will be sung in Christian churches, [and] we may see our wives and daughters the victims of legal prostitution; soberly dishonored; [and] speciously polluted.”<sup>6</sup>

Early in the nation’s history, the party in power tested the relationship between government and freedom of speech and the press, with the outcome ultimately on the side of freedom. The Sedition Act of 1798 made it a federal crime to “write, print, utter or publish . . . any false, scandalous and malicious writing . . . against the government of the United States.”<sup>7</sup> At the time, Jefferson, a Republican, serving as vice president under the Federalist John Adams, vigorously opposed passage, believing the act unconstitutional under the First Amendment. The Federalist secretary of state, Timothy Pickering, used the act to prosecute opposition Democratic-Republican newspapers in the election of 1800. Among the twenty-five journalists convicted under the act was Benjamin Franklin’s grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache, publisher of Philadelphia’s *Aurora*.<sup>8</sup>

Jefferson was among those who had enshrined the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights. That decision put in place a constitutional protection for the press. In his inaugural address in 1805 Jefferson included these words:

The artillery of the press has been leveled against us, charged with whatsoever its licentiousness could devise or dare. These abuses of an institution so important to freedom and science are deeply to be regretted, inasmuch as they tend to lessen its usefulness and to sap its safety. . . . Our fellow-citizens looked on, cool and collected; they saw the latent source from which these outrages proceeded. . . . The public judgment will correct false reasoning and opinions on a full hearing of all parties; and no other definite line can be drawn between the inestimable liberty of the press and its demoralizing licentiousness. If there be still improprieties which this rule would not restrain, its supplement must be sought in the censorship of public opinion.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not one considers the press the fourth branch of government,<sup>10</sup> the outcome in this early test of press freedom bolstered the First Amendment guarantee and gave the press “a central role in a political and social process, that

of communication.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as the political communication scholar Timothy Cook suggests, “the American news media today are not merely part of politics; they are part of government.”<sup>12</sup>

As Jefferson’s inaugural indicates, the “marketplace of ideas” notion had taken root by 1800. The press scholars Robert Schmuhl and Robert Picard attest that “the media (broadly defined) are now considered the primary ‘marketplace of ideas’ in the United States, the forum in which truth, falsehood, and every expression in between compete for acceptance and approval.”<sup>13</sup>

The notion that truth will emerge in the clash of competing claims antedated Jefferson. “Let Truth and Falsehood grapple,” argued John Milton in *Areopagitica*, “who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter.”<sup>14</sup> In this country, founder Benjamin Franklin tied the clash of ideas specifically to the press in his 1731 “Apology for Printers,” when he argued that “both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick.”<sup>15</sup> The concept was embodied in the metaphor of the marketplace in a dissenting opinion by Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., who wrote that “the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.”<sup>16</sup>

Those who challenge the assumptions underlying this model argue that there is no such thing as “truth,” that deception may well win out in a contest with its opposite, and that both the public’s interest in civic knowledge and its capacity for making sense of political debate are severely constrained. Notably, the English philosopher John Stuart Mill doubted that the truth would necessarily triumph in its contest with falsity. In the twentieth century, Isaiah Berlin came down on Mills’s side, asking, “Are demagogues and liars, scoundrels and blind fanatics, always, in liberal societies, stopped in time, or refuted in the end?”<sup>17</sup> Whatever the limitations of the metaphor and the model underlying it, “the concept of the marketplace of ideas as a means of protecting democracy and the public interest is now accepted as a major tenet of Western society.”<sup>18</sup>

Even within the marketplace model, there are different views of the appropriate functions of the press. This chapter examines how well the press is performing four functions that can be considered central. First, how effective is it at informing? Specifically, since the press tells citizens much of what is known of Congress, the executive branch, the courts, and the public schools, what does it say about them and how adequate and accurate are the accounts? Second, the press both sets an agenda, telling the public what to think about, and frames the ways in which the public considers these matters. Are the interests of democracy advanced by the ways in which the press is performing these agenda-setting and framing functions? Third, the press acts as a watchdog, asking critical questions and scrutinizing government and other institutions. Performing this role requires that the press stand in for the public. Does it? And if so, how well? Finally, the press creates a forum in which issues are debated and political actors and groups

communicate. According to the scholars Gabriel de Tarde, Jürgen Habermas, and Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld,<sup>19</sup> news media provide the tools for deliberative democracy and political action. But how well are these representing and deliberation-producing functions being executed?

Before undertaking this four-part analysis, however, this chapter makes the argument that what constitutes the press is a changing notion. Specifically, there are many ways other than the press or news media through which the public gets news. At the same time, the reemergence of the partisan press has caused public confusion and journalistic anxiety about what is and is not a news medium and who is and is not a journalist. The contention presented here is that both *detached* and *partisan* journalism serve important functions in a democracy and that each has strengths and limitations. The discussion also focuses on how negative perceptions of the press undercut its ability to serve the needs of democracy. Those who perceive the press to be deficient in performing its informing function are more likely to believe that in a time characterized by heightened threats to national security, as in the early twenty-first century's "war on terror," government should have a right to censor the press. In other words, one serious consequence of a perception of poor press performance may be increased risk that the press's First Amendment protection from government will be jeopardized, making it less able to represent the public, hold government accountable, set an issue agenda, and inform. The detached press's ability to correct this perception may be limited by the fact that journalists in this tradition do not acknowledge the existence of the problem.

The discussion begins by looking at how "news" is defined and delivered in the twenty-first century, and then offers a distinction between those media that adopt balance, fairness, and objectivity as norms, and the partisan media. The media landscape is changing, and with it so too are the ways in which the media inform, set agendas, hold government and powerful institutions accountable, and foster debate. Throughout this chapter, data are drawn from the Annenberg Institutions of Democracy Media survey, the methodology of which is described in the appendix.

### *The Changing Face of News*

Discussions of how well the media, or the press, are doing are often confused by the absence of a clear notion of what is being talked about. There is no dispute, however, about the fact that the amount of available news and the ease with which it can be accessed have increased dramatically. Thanks to the Internet, the average user now has increased access to media and an unprecedented capacity to create news sites in the form of blogs (Web logs). Somewhere between 92 and 128 million people in the United States went online for news in 2004.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Google News, which permits wide-ranging searches of news

sources, averaged 6 million unique viewers a month in the first ten months of 2004. Among other things, this means that Google has become a packager of news, a news outlet.<sup>21</sup>

There also is useful information about government and public policy in venues as varied as prime-time television drama, as fans of *The West Wing* were particularly aware, and in contemporary satire, in particular *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. As the press scholar Robert Entman argues:

Media not bound by the canons and practices of traditional journalism can serve the core democratizing functions of news, the functions that help citizens hold government to account. These news functions involve illuminating four areas of knowledge vital to effective democratic citizenship:

1. Policy (specific public policy issues)
2. Power (the actions of individuals [especially public officials] and groups exerting political power)
3. Ideology (the philosophical perspectives that shape decisions on allocating wealth, status, and other valued resources)
4. Self-interest (individuals' own political interests and stakes in policy issues and elections, and their roles in society).<sup>22</sup>

Employing a similar line of reasoning, the press theorist Barbie Zelizer argues that "Dan Rather, Matt Drudge, and Jon Stewart—a professional broadcast journalist, an Internet scoopster and columnist, and a popular television satirist—all convey authentic news of contemporary affairs to a general public, despite the questions raised about whether they are all journalists and all do journalism."<sup>23</sup> A 2004 survey, for example, found that almost one in three respondents reported "sometimes or regularly getting election news from late night TV."<sup>24</sup>

While one might associate the venues of Stewart and Drudge with journalism, they are not traditionally considered "news media." Although many forms of media are constitutionally protected, it is what will be called here the "detached" media to which scholars are usually referring when they speak about "the press."

### *Detached versus Partisan Media*

However, if one identifies the functions that Stewart and Drudge serve, one finds that Drudge does in fact inform (it was he, after all, who broke the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal), and Stewart not only informs but, better than many traditional news outlets, holds political leaders accountable for their statements and inconsistencies. In the world as it is segmented here, Rather falls into the definition of detached journalism rooted in the values of objectivity, fairness, and balance;

Drudge parses into the partisan model in which news stories are more likely to be framed, spun, and slanted so that certain political agendas are advanced; and Stewart is difficult to categorize. When Rather falters over the documents that he offered as proof that incumbent president George W. Bush slighted the requirements of service in the National Guard, the then CBS anchor and *60 Minutes Wednesday* host fails by the standards of detached journalism. The report was selective in its use of evidence and failed to satisfy the tests of evidence required to establish the credibility of the offered documents. As a result, Rather is hoist on the charge that he is a partisan masquerading as a champion of the detached, "objective," balanced, fair model.

A brief review of the specifics: On the September 8, 2004, segment of *60 Minutes Wednesday*, CBS anchor Dan Rather presented four documents (known as the Killian documents) purportedly taken from the personal files of the late Lieutenant Colonel Jerry B. Killian, commander of the 111th Fighter Interceptor Squadron. Then-lieutenant George W. Bush served under Killian from May 1968 to October 1973. With the military records of Bush and John Kerry, both presidential candidates in the 2004 election, under scrutiny at this time, these documents were presented as new information on the service record of President Bush that supported the allegation that Bush received preferential treatment while in the Texas Air National Guard. The segment created a controversy, originating in the blogosphere, that centered on the authenticity of these documents. Almost two weeks after the *60 Minutes Wednesday* segment aired, CBS News president Andrew Hayward issued a statement saying that CBS could not establish the documents' authenticity. Was airing of the documents an honest mistake or an outcome of liberal bias on the part of Dan Rather and CBS News?

When asked this question, the public and the press responding to the Annenberg Media survey differed. The journalists surveyed did not fault the ethical standards of CBS News. Seventy-six percent of journalists polled said that a major reason CBS ran the story was because it believed the report was accurate; 53 percent of the public felt CBS believed the report to be accurate. On the other hand, 40 percent of the public agreed that a major reason the story aired was that CBS News and Dan Rather are liberals who dislike President Bush. Twenty-nine percent of the public felt that liberal bias was a minor reason for the story being broadcast. Only 10 percent of journalists believed that liberal bias was a major reason, with 31 percent believing it to be a minor reason.

If the public perceives the detached press as biased, and concludes that it is practicing a form of political advocacy, then all four functions of the press are simultaneously undercut. It can't inform because it will not be believed, it cannot scrutinize because the motivation behind the scrutiny will be suspect, it cannot foster debate because it is no longer viewed as independent and objective, and it cannot represent because it is seen as the surrogate for those on one side of the argument. Note how different the scenario would have been had a blogger not



tied to a major news organization done what Rather did or if the conservative radio-talk-show host Rush Limbaugh had made similar charges against a Democrat. The standards to which the partisan and detached media are held are different because one is presumed to aspire to balance, objectivity, and an airing of all sides while the other is assumed to selectively use evidence, offering evidence from the other side only when it can be refuted.

Although in general the public expressed confidence that journalists aspire to and do succeed at fair and objective reporting, 69 percent felt that liberal bias was either a major or minor reason in the decision by CBS News to run the story on President Bush's military service. A sizable majority of the public expressed the understanding that political biases play a part in the news they receive.

Even as it consumes partisan media, the public continues to demonstrate that it values the model based on the objectivity ideal. According to survey data, the public finds partisan journalism less informative than its nonpartisan cousin. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed said that they learn more from the coverage of journalists who do not openly express their political views, compared to 35 percent who reported that they learn more from the coverage of journalists who make their political views clear. Almost the same margin was produced when the public was asked which format they enjoyed more. Fifty-seven percent said they enjoy coverage from journalists who do not express their political views, as compared to 35 percent who said that they enjoy coverage from media figures expressing clear political views.

One might read these findings and say, Each to her own. The fact that citizens can choose from a range of approaches increases the likelihood that they will consume news at all.<sup>25</sup>

Unsurprisingly, detached journalists, who were the ones interviewed in the Annenberg Media survey, viewed their partisan competitors with a blend of anxiety and hostility.<sup>26</sup> Most (80 percent) said that news with a decidedly political point of view is bad for the American people. Liberal (84 percent) and moderate (84 percent) journalists were more likely to feel this way than conservative journalists (64 percent), a finding that is not surprising given that the advocacy media, as argued here, are largely conservative.

The public, on the other hand, reflected more mixed views. Slightly over half (53 percent) said that news coverage with a partisan point of view is bad. This view was dependent on age. In fact, a majority (54 percent) of young people, ages eighteen to twenty-nine, said that it is good if some news organizations have a decidedly partisan view.

### *Different Media, Different Roles*

This discussion adapts a perspective on the detached versus partisan or adversarial news media suggested by the press scholar James Curran. The assumption is

made that “the media are not a single entity” and, as a result, “there should be a division of labor in which different sectors of the media have different roles, practice different forms of journalism, and make different contributions to the functioning of the democratic system.”<sup>27</sup> This view makes it possible to ascribe one set of functions to the core media of society, the detached or objective media, and another to the partisan or advocacy media. In this conception, the detached media are accountable to one set of expectations and standards and the advocacy media to another.

Thus the partisan or advocacy media (such as blogs and talk radio)<sup>28</sup> are seen as having one set of roles, and the detached media (for Curran, mass television channels and monopoly local dailies) as having another. Where the detached media aspire to objectivity, privilege accuracy, and ascribe to fair and balanced journalism, the partisan or advocacy media are case makers who work from unveiled ideological assumptions. The objectivity norm assumes that “journalists should be politically neutral and separate from attachments to political parties and organized social groups.”<sup>29</sup> “Partisan media are essentially propagandistic, advancing at best partial truths. Balanced media report ‘multiple truths’ advanced by rival spokespersons.”<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note that the public believes that it gets news from the partisan media. Sixty-five percent of those who reported listening to or watching shows such as *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, *The O’Reilly Factor*, and *Hardball* said that a major reason they do so is to help them keep up with the news. This finding holds across demographic groups. Men and women, older and younger, less well educated and better educated equally said they watch these programs to keep up with the news. When asked if “listening to people who mostly think like I do” is a major reason for tuning in, 28 percent of the public agreed. However, 44 percent said that a major reason they tune in is to listen to people who have different points of view. It would seem that people are getting what they see as news as part of a mix that includes heavy doses of explicit opinion.

### *Perceptions of Journalists*

Where they exist, the differences between journalists’ perceptions of who is and who is not a journalist and the public’s can be explained in part at least by the assumption that journalists are more likely to see those who adopt the norms of objectivity and balance, in other words those in the detached camp, as journalists, where the public is more likely to grant that label as well to those who embrace one-sided positions and selectively marshal evidence to support that side. Ninety-seven percent of the journalists polled expressed the belief that it is important for the American public to distinguish those who are journalists from those who are not. However, 85 percent of journalists reported that it is not easy to make such a distinction. The basis for such a

distinction, it seems clear, is in acceptance of objectivity, fairness, and balance as norms.

Journalists and the public hold similar views when it comes to well-known individuals on network television who espouse the detached model. Ninety-one percent of journalists and 79 percent of the public agreed in our survey that Peter Jennings is a journalist (the survey was conducted before Jennings's death in August 2005). Ninety-two percent of journalists and 64 percent of the public thought the same of *60 Minutes'* Mike Wallace. Eighty percent of journalists and 42 percent of the public agreed that NBC's Brian Williams is a journalist. Ten percent said they did not know whether Peter Jennings is a journalist or not; 20 percent expressed uncertainty about Mike Wallace; and 38 percent did not know if Brian Williams is a journalist. (See Table 1.)

Moving to news and entertainment shows, the hosts of which are more often seen as interviewers than reporters, the public is more likely than journalists to view these individuals as journalists. This may be because the public sees their interviews and interview styles as part of the detached model, where, by contrast, journalists set these shows off from straight news shows because the bulk of their content focuses on "soft" topics such as family relations, cooking tips, and health advice. Specifically, 48 percent of the public and 49 percent of journalists considered then-*Today* cohost Katie Couric a journalist, while only 26 percent of journalists and 37 percent of the public viewed CNN talk show host Larry King the same way. Twenty-three percent of the American public surveyed said they were unsure whether Katie Couric was a journalist or not. Fifteen percent expressed uncertainty about whether the designation applied to Larry King.

The public and journalists hold divergent views on who is a journalist and who is not when it comes to people who host political talk shows. Only 3 percent of the journalists surveyed considered Rush Limbaugh to be a journalist, compared to 55 percent of the public who said that he is not. Of those asked, 18 percent did not know if Rush Limbaugh is a journalist or not. Importantly, Limbaugh does not consider himself a journalist. Why does an increased percentage of the public, as compared to journalists, feel this way? Limbaugh deals almost exclusively with political topics and comments on news throughout his show. It is likely that the partisan nature of his comments pushes him outside the definition of journalist held by those journalists sampled, all of whom fall into the detached model themselves, but the substantive focus on news and public affairs places him within that definition for a third of the public.

Twelve percent of journalists and 40 percent of the public agreed that Bill O'Reilly is a journalist. Of those asked, 27 percent were undecided. *Hardball's* Chris Matthews was the exception to this pattern, with the public and journalists in closer agreement. Thirty-three percent of the public and 49 percent of journalists expressed the understanding that Matthews is a journalist. Of

## CH 2: The Effectiveness of the Press in Serving the Needs of American Democracy

TABLE 1  
Perceptions of Media Figures as "Journalists"

<b>Who is a journalist?</b>			
<b>Personage</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
Peter Jennings	79%	11	10
Mike Wallace	64	16	20
Katie Couric (then of <i>Today</i> show)	48	29	23
Brian Williams	42	19	38
Bill O'Reilly	40	33	27
Larry King	37	48	15
Chris Matthews	33	27	40
Bob Woodward	30	17	53
Rush Limbaugh	27	55	18
George Will	19	19	62

Survey of the general public, conducted from March 3 to April 5, 2005.

<b>How close does this person come to your idea of what a journalist is?</b>					
<b>Personage</b>	<b>Very close</b>	<b>Somewhat Close</b>	<b>Not too close</b>	<b>Not close at all</b>	<b>Don't know/no answer</b>
Peter Jennings	44%	44	8	1	3
Mike Wallace	58	33	5	3	1
Katie Couric (then of <i>Today</i> show)	11	37	28	21	3
Brian Williams	30	42	10	8	10
Bill O'Reilly	1	10	19	65	5
Larry King	6	20	34	38	2
Chris Matthews	10	36	28	19	7
Bob Woodward	72	21	4	0	3
Rush Limbaugh	1	2	13	82	2
George Will	20	41	21	13	5

Survey of journalists, conducted from March 7 to May 2, 2005.

the public who were asked this question, 40 percent were undecided. Note that a higher percentage of surveyed respondents listened to these individuals for news than considered them journalists, a finding that admits to the possibility that at least part of the public reserves the label “journalist” for those whose prime responsibility is news and who adhere to the ideal of objectivity, while at the same time absorbing content that they define as news from partisan nonjournalists.

### *Blogging and Other Challenges to Traditional Media*

As an aide to Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert observed, “Blogging is the new talk radio.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that bloggers perform news functions is clear. Traditional news reporters in the room for a one-hundredth birthday party for Senator Strom Thurmond failed to recognize the news value of Senator Trent Lott’s praise of the elderly senator’s 1948 presidential run, a run predicated on the need to maintain racial segregation. Not so bloggers Joshua Micah Marshall and Glenn Reynolds, who watched the event on C-SPAN. They propelled the remark into a controversy that led to Lott’s decision that he would not seek a return to his position as Republican majority leader in the Senate. The perceptive bloggers informed the mainstream media and the public of the remark, held Lott accountable for it, participated in the national debate about the meaning of the remark, and did so from a position untied to either political party.

As noted earlier, blogs made news by performing a fact-finding function when they cast doubts on the authenticity of documents used on the CBS program *60 Minutes Wednesday*. And it was the online magazine *Salon* that demonstrated that the *New York Times* was mistaken in its identification of the subject of an iconic photograph from the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, a hooded man standing with outstretched arms on a box. The exposé on that Web news site prompted a correction of the original story by the *New York Times* in March 2006.

Blogging appears to be here to stay. “By the end of 2004,” reports Lee Rainie, head of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, “blogs had established themselves as a key part of online culture: 7% of U.S. internet users say they have created blogs and 27% say they are blog readers.”<sup>32</sup> Among other things, this means that the adage that freedom of the press belongs to those who own one is now upended. And blogs are attracting audiences in their own right. The Annenberg Media survey found that 28 percent of the public and 52 percent of journalists turn to blogs for news. And 4 percent of surveyed journalists write their own blogs.

Scholars are beginning to conceptualize blogs as a new form of journalism.<sup>33</sup> As Melissa Wall suggests, blogs can best be thought of in a postmodern context because of the de-emphasis on objective reporting and data gathering and an

emphasis on a more active role by the author.<sup>34</sup> When a member of the public becomes a blogger, the reader has become a writer. Most bloggers, however, do not see their Web writings as a new form of journalism. Sixty-five percent of bloggers polled by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2006 said that their postings were not a form of journalism, yet a majority (57 percent) linked to original sources or (56 percent) spent time verifying facts that they wanted to include in their posts.<sup>35</sup> Basically, what this suggests is that although bloggers do not consider themselves journalists, they practice a vetting process in order to ensure some objectivity and maintain credibility. And in this sense bloggers do resemble the image of a journalist. On the other hand, this same study by Pew found that bloggers are not posting in order to meet the four functions of the press outlined in this chapter. The most cited reason for a person to blog was self-expression.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the objectivity of journalism loses out to personal preferences and self-selection. Hence, one should not be overly celebratory, rejoicing that bloggers are the new watchdogs for public interests.

That said, discussion of the *60 Minutes Wednesday* case and of other incidents of Web journalism tend to foreground the power of bloggers. And indeed, bloggers could be thought of as “para-journalists.”<sup>37</sup> In today’s news environment the notion of the traditional audience as the “receiver” is becoming increasingly outdated. There is a new “active” audience providing direct feedback, within a very short period of time, to the mass media. With channels for instant feedback, the audience can exert pressure on traditional media. In this sense, bloggers are both a new form of press and a monitor of the traditional media. In this role, bloggers are opinion leaders mediating opinion from the public to the major news organizations.

### *The New Partisan Press*

Along with the appearance of bloggers, since the mid-1980s the number of outlets that convey information from a specific identifiable ideological point of view has multiplied. Speaking of the rise of right-of-center talk radio and Web sites as well as the Fox News Channel, the conservative organizer Paul Weyrich noted in fall 2003, “There are 1,500 conservative radio talk show hosts. . . . You have FOX News. You have the Internet, where all the successful sites are conservative. The ability to reach people with our point of view is like nothing we have ever seen before.”<sup>38</sup>

The top-rated political talk radio host in the nation is Rush Limbaugh. Media reports place his listenership between 14.5 and 20 million listeners. In 2004, *Talkers Magazine* put Limbaugh’s audience at 14.75 million and Sean Hannity’s at 13 million, on six hundred stations.<sup>39</sup> To set Limbaugh’s audience in perspective, the Annenberg Institutions of Democracy Government survey conducted in fall 2003 found that more than two in ten Americans (26 percent) lis-

ten every week to National Public Radio (NPR), which adopts the detached, balanced, objective model of journalism; one in ten say the same about Rush Limbaugh (10 percent), whose show embodies the partisan mode. The same survey found a third of Americans (32 percent) saying that they listen to talk radio weekly, with a majority of Americans (54 percent) reporting that they listen to talk radio at least once a month.

At the same time, Fox News Channel, which blends the detached model in its hard news and the partisan model in its political talk formats, has a higher average number of viewers than any of the other cable outlets. In December 2004, Nielsen Media Research figures showed that "FOX averaged 1.67 million viewers in primetime compared with CNN's 855,000, MSNBC's 374,000, Headline News' 212,000 and CNBC's 161,000."<sup>40</sup>

Conservatives acknowledge that the frame of the news on Fox is conservative. "Watch Fox for just a few hours," writes Brian Anderson, "and you encounter a conservative presence unlike anything on TV. Where CBS and CNN would lead a news item about an impending execution with a candlelight vigil of death-penalty protesters, for instance, at Fox 'it is de rigueur that we put in the lead why that person is being executed,' senior vice president for news John Moody noted. . . . Fox viewers will see Republican politicians and conservative pundits sought out for meaningful quotations, skepticism voiced about environmentalist doomsaying, religion treated with respect, pro-life views given airtime—and much else they'd never find on other networks."<sup>41</sup> "Conservatives will almost always defend Fox's claim to be 'fair and balanced,'" writes conservative direct mail consultant Richard Viguerie, "but they find it hard to do so without a smirk or smile on their face. . . . They proudly want to claim Fox as one of their own—it's one of the movement's great success stories."<sup>42</sup>

### *Comparison of Press Models*

In the marketplace of ideas, the partisan and objective media play both different and similar roles. Each performs an accountability function. Until the rise of talk radio and the blogosphere, the main critiques of the mainstream detached media came from scholars and those individuals who disagreed with the way they were portrayed in mainstream news. Now the mainstream detached media critique the partisan media and vice versa with a healthy regularity.

The strength of the detached media resides in their ability to enable "divergent viewpoints and interests to be aired in reciprocal debate. Their central democratic purpose is . . . to mediate between social groups, rather than to champion exclusively one group and set of concerns."<sup>43</sup>

The downside of the detached media, or better put, their vulnerability, comes from the assumptions associated with "objective reporting." Objective reporting can, as work by Stephen Hess has consistently shown,<sup>44</sup> "lead journalists to rely on

established power holders and legitimated holders of knowledge as sources of news and comment, and unconsciously internalize assumptions that are 'uncontroversial' within the prevailing framework of thought."<sup>45</sup> As suggested earlier, an objective stance helps the press inform the public. Still, journalistic objectivity may issue from a less noble motivation than promoting democracy. Gaye Tuchman argued that journalists preempt criticism of their work by "emphasizing 'objectivity,' arguing that dangers can be minimized if newsmen follow strategies of newswork which they identify with 'objective stories.' They assume that, if every reporter gathers and structures 'facts' in a detached, unbiased, impersonal manner, deadlines will be met and libel suits avoided."<sup>46</sup> In this sense, providing truths to the public becomes a secondary outcome, eclipsed by journalists' concern for not catching flack from senior editors, other news outlets, and public officials' attorneys.

At the same time, the norm of balance and the desire to be perceived as detached can mean that when dealing with controversial subjects "of a highly partisan nature" journalists become "reluctant to be perceived as taking sides," leaving such stories unresolved, "and the public is never quite sure whose 'spin'—if anyone's—is located in closer proximity to the truth."<sup>47</sup>

By contrast to the establishment-friendly detached media with their reliance on official sources, partisan or adversarial media "are often more ready to voice maverick or dissenting opinions than mainstream media because they cater to minorities and are unconstrained by the 'fair and balanced' norms of objective journalism."<sup>48</sup> In the process, "they can also provide liberating access to alternative ideas and arguments."<sup>49</sup> In other words, the strength of the partisan media counterbalances the weakness of the detached media.

A common concern is that the reemergence of partisan news media will increase the likelihood that partisans hear only one side of the debate. If this occurred, it could minimize deliberation and increase polarization. Arguments that partisan journalism may be polarizing the electorate because individuals are self-selecting news that is consistent with their own points of view are not borne out by the evidence, however. Results of the Annenberg Media survey show that more individuals turn to partisan news outlets to hear different points of view than to hear similar views. But why? Is it because these individuals want to be informed on all sides of an issue? Or are liberals listening to Rush Limbaugh so that they can heartily disagree with all he is saying? Either way, decades of research have suggested that exposure to diverse viewpoints leads to better-informed opinions and higher levels of political knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, evidence from the National Annenberg Election survey from 2004 reveals that both Limbaugh listeners and Fox viewers were more, not less, likely than those of comparable educational level and ideological bent to view presidential general-election debates. Decades of scholarship tie debate viewership to increased issue knowledge.<sup>51</sup> And on a detailed survey of uncon-



tested facts from that election, Limbaugh's listeners scored above those of comparable educational background and ideological persuasion who were nonlisteners.

Harkening to the era of the partisan press, the partisan media also inform and contribute to public debate by taking the world of raw fact and cascading opinion and fashioning from it coherent ideological interpretations. Rush Limbaugh performs the role of leader for conservatives in a fashion reminiscent of the early-nineteenth-century alliance between party and partisan press.<sup>52</sup>

Although it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the patronage apparatus tied to partisan newspapers, some scholars believe that the partisan press "may well have been critical to party efforts to raise voter turnout."<sup>53</sup> In the twentieth century, that alliance between the print press and the parties was severed with the rise of nonpartisan or "objective" journalism. Now, it can be argued, partisan and objective journalism coexist, performing different functions for democracy.

As de facto conservative party leader, Limbaugh translates the elements of Reagan conservatism for listeners. In his role as party leader, Limbaugh reinforces a set of coherent rhetorical frames that empower his listeners to act as conservative opinion leaders, and enable him to mobilize party members for action, hold the Republican Party and its leaders accountable, and occasionally help screen candidates for the party's nomination. He also translates the content of the news media from a conservative perspective.

The downside of partisan media occurs when these outlets circulate "scurrilous information about public figures that has no foundation in truth."<sup>54</sup> Also, as the media scholar James Hamilton notes, "The low cost of entry to placing information in the Internet has had many effects on news. The ability of news outlets, and columnists such as Matt Drudge, to post instantly during any time of the day has extended news cycles and created additional pressure on traditional news outlets to run with breaking news. The lack of large investment in sites means that news provided may not be heavily edited or screened, which can give rise to a spread of rumor and gossip."<sup>55</sup>

### *Four Functions of the Press*<sup>56</sup>

#### *Function One: Informing*

There is no serious dispute that in the buzzing, blooming, information-saturated world of the twenty-first century, informing the public is a central press function. "Media are normatively expected to provide diverse and pluralistic content that includes a wide variety of information, opinions, and perspectives on developments that affect the lives of citizens," writes the media economics scholar Robert Picard.<sup>57</sup> The Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas put it well when he said, "The press has a preferred position in our constitutional scheme, not to enable it to make money, not to set newsmen apart as a favored

class, but to bring fulfillment of the public's right to know."<sup>58</sup> Journalists agree. "The purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing" write the veteran journalists Bill Kovatch and Tom Rosenstiel.<sup>59</sup> "Only great newspapers," observe the *Washington Post's* Leonard Downie Jr. and Robert G. Kaiser, "systematically provide the factual information, interpretation and commentary that make the American system work."<sup>60</sup> "The country's democracy may belong directly or indirectly to its citizens, but the democratic process can only be truly meaningful if these citizens are informed."<sup>61</sup>

One scholarly finding speaks well of the informing power of newspapers and the value of education. Among the consistent predictors of knowledge of public affairs and civics knowledge are education and newspaper reading.<sup>62</sup> This finding was replicated in the Annenberg Media survey as well.

It would appear that a solid majority of the public continues to trust the press. Also reassuring is the fact that research has shown that news media use is promoting civic activity among young people. A 2006 study conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center clearly confirmed that news media use was positively related to political awareness and civic activity in a national sample of American youths, ages fourteen to twenty-two.<sup>63</sup> Specifically, this study found that young people's use of the Internet to gather news, book reading, and watching national television news are related to political engagement and are a source of social capital.

How well do detached journalists believe that they are upholding the ideals to which they aspire in informing the public, including balance, objectivity, and accuracy? Journalists recognize that the norm of balance can readily be perverted into a form of reporting in which political arguments or standpoints are covered only in terms of counterarguments and opposing standpoints. This problem manifests itself most clearly when one side in a political campaign engages in a higher level of deception than the other. What do reporters do in such circumstances? The Annenberg Media survey asked, "In a political campaign, if one side is using deceptive tactics more often than the opponents, do most journalists usually report the greater use of deception by one side, just report that both sides are using deception, or avoid the matter completely?" A majority of the journalists (58 percent) surveyed believe that most journalists report that both sides are using deception. Of those journalists, 79 percent believe that by failing to point out that one side is more deceptive, journalists are suggesting that both sides are engaged in a similar amount of deception. This admission is a tacit acknowledgment that journalists are failing at their role as campaign watchdog and that in this circumstance, striving for balance in informing the public can compromise this other important democratic function.

Are news media accurately reporting facts? Journalists think so. In fact, 86 percent of the journalists polled expressed the belief that news organizations get

the facts straight. Only 11 percent of journalists believed that their stories and reports are often inaccurate. The public, however, does not hold the press in such high regard. Specifically, only 45 percent of the public, according to the Annenberg survey, think that news organizations get the facts straight, with 48 percent saying that stories and reports are often inaccurate.

The informing function presupposes not only that the press gets it right but that when it gets it wrong, it corrects its mistakes. Here there is a serious disjuncture between the perception of reporters and that of the public. Forty-one percent of the public, versus only 3 percent of journalists, expressed the belief that when a “serious” mistake is made, most news organizations try to cover it up. Seventy-four percent of journalists surveyed said that most news organizations try to promptly report that a mistake was made, but only 30 percent of the public feel this way.

Results from another part of the survey, however, show that the public still has some regard for the press’s capacity to correct its errors. The public expressed the belief that the news media handled two recent controversies well. For example, a majority of the public (58 percent) felt that CBS News and Dan Rather did a good job of addressing mistakes made in the airing of the *60 Minutes Wednesday* broadcast on President Bush’s National Guard record. A lesser percent of journalists (52 percent) felt this way. And when the *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair was found to be plagiarizing and fabricating news stories, 61 percent of the public who had read or heard about Blair’s activities believed that the *Times* did a good job of addressing the situation. Eighty percent of the journalists polled felt the same way.

What about objectivity? Almost all of the journalists in the Annenberg survey sample expressed the belief that their fellow reporters strive for objectivity. Specifically, 94 percent of the journalists surveyed think their colleagues try to report the news objectively, without regard to their own political views. Although less than half of the American public thinks that news organizations get their facts straight, the public is generally confident in journalists, but to a lesser degree than are the journalists themselves. Almost two-thirds of the public surveyed believed that journalists try to report objectively and fairly. Similarly, 91 percent of journalists and 63 percent of the public believed that journalists succeed in being objective.

Pointing to waning levels of political knowledge held by Americans,<sup>64</sup> many scholars have concluded that the news media are failing. These scholars call for the media to supply higher-quality news coverage and devote more time to the issues. However, as Thomas Patterson and Philip Seib rightly point out, “Although it is impossible to watch television news or read the typical newspaper without concluding that the quality of information could be higher, it is less certain that raising the level would produce a markedly better informed public.”<sup>65</sup> These authors believe that the problem resides in an oversaturated

news-media environment. There is too much information for the average citizen to comprehend and retain. The political scientist John Zaller calls this the "Full News" standard for the quality of news. This standard, driven by the notion of objectivity, posits that the news should provide "basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all of the major issues of the day."<sup>66</sup> In other words, it should provide all the news of the day in an unbiased fashion. Zaller argues that such a standard is actually too demanding on the average citizen in that it requires continual monitoring of current events. Along these same lines, the news scholar W. Lance Bennett has suggested that the news is too fragmented and superficial to be useful to the average citizen.<sup>67</sup> There are too many facts reported, without any coherent in-depth linkage.

Scholars offer a final indictment of the way in which the press covers politics. When reporters focus on political strategizing, as three decades of studies suggest is the case,<sup>68</sup> they pervert their informational role, exposing political manipulation rather than focusing on viewpoints and platforms. In revealing the strategies behind political rhetoric, they may be trying to increase the transparency of the campaign process, but without an accompanying analysis of the issues, this form of reporting makes it difficult for voters to know whom to believe. By emphasizing strategy over substance in political campaigns, the press sunders the link between campaigning and governance, activates cynicism, and depresses voter learning.<sup>69</sup> Reporting only the facts and not the values that underscore political debate can be problematic and leads to the depiction of political conflict as political gaming.<sup>70</sup> In other words, debate on substantive issues gets framed in the news media as a conflict between political parties, and the embedded values and beliefs that are at the heart of the debate are not discussed. Reporting of simple facts that focus on political behavior of political leaders during a political conflict distances some citizens from politics.<sup>71</sup>

News reporting focusing on the political issues instead of the political conflicts surrounding the debate does have measurable consequences. In a study of the media effects of reporting on the health-care-reform debate of 1993–94, Cappella and Jamieson found that "strategic" coverage activated cynicism and depressed learning about the substance of the debate.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, by focusing on the conflict between two plans rather than the areas of agreement shared by all seven actually at play, the press reports made it more difficult for the public to perceive commonality among the alternatives.<sup>73</sup> Each plan, for example, ensured that health insurance coverage would not be lost when a person switched employers, a notion with broad public support. Had that element of the plans been featured and public opinion on it tested, reform legislation might have been passed in 1994 rather than being delayed until the following Congress.

Strategic coverage activates cynicism about elective politics as well. In a study that exposed audiences to strategic and issues-based coverage of a

Philadelphia mayoral election, Cappella and Jamieson found that those exposed to strategic coverage of the election concluded that the candidates were unlikely to keep their promises and were simply telling the public what it wanted to hear.<sup>74</sup> Those exposed to issues-based coverage were less likely to report these inferences.

Were the conclusions drawn by those exposed to strategic coverage realistic or cynical? Democrat Ed Rendell was elected mayor in that election. Not only did he keep the central promises he made in the campaign, but later surveys attested to the fact that the public believed that he had. When he ran for reelection, Rendell won in a landslide. And when he ran for governor of Pennsylvania he carried his home city overwhelmingly. Those in the study who had drawn the conclusion that he was simply pandering were proven wrong by his behavior in office. Their response was cynical, not realistic.

### *Function Two: Setting the Agenda*

The journalist, as Cater observed, “can choose from among the myriad events that seethe beneath the surface of government which to describe, which to ignore. He can illuminate policy . . . he can prematurely expose policy and, as with an undeveloped film, cause its destruction. At his worst, operating with arbitrary and faulty standards, he can be an agent of disorder and confusion. At his best, he can exert a creative influence on Washington politics.”<sup>75</sup> Here we ask, How effective is the press in bringing important debates to the fore?

It is clear that the media can focus people on some topics rather than others and on some candidate attributes rather than others.<sup>76</sup> “By giving prominence to certain issues, concerns, and proposals, core media in effect privilege them and provide the opportunity for them to win wider support.”<sup>77</sup>

For unobtrusive issues such as distant wars and abstractions such as the trade balance and the budget deficit, “the press is the citizenry’s principal source of information and enjoys considerable influence.”<sup>78</sup> The agenda-setting power of the press can prompt government response. As Martha Kumar and Alex Jones note, “With television pictures aired worldwide in the summer and fall of 1992 showing people suffering from extreme malnourishment in Somalia, President George H.W. Bush responded to calls for help from the United States by sending troops there. Prior to that point, complained at least one official in the State Department, those calling for action had little effect on administration officials.”<sup>79</sup>

The consequence of the press’s failure to accurately assess the importance of a story can be damaging to the country. In January 2001 a bipartisan U.S. National Commission on National Security chaired by former senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman warned that “the combination of unconventional weapons proliferation with the persistence of international terrorism will end the relative invulnerability of the U.S. homeland to catastrophic attack. A direct attack against American citizens on American soil is likely over the next quarter

century.”<sup>80</sup> The report was featured in the *Los Angeles Times*,<sup>81</sup> buried on the inside of a few other papers, and largely ignored by the mass media. Neither Rudman nor Hart was invited to appear on any of the major networks. Nor did an appearance by CIA director George Tenet before the Senate Intelligence Committee who warned that “Osama bin Laden and his global network of lieutenants and associates remain the most immediate and serious threat” to American national security become front-page news.<sup>82</sup> Did it matter? Imagine that the press had made a big deal out of the report and Tenet’s testimony. Imagine that President Bush were asked repeatedly how the United States was preparing. Would the country have been better prepared for September 11?<sup>83</sup>

Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, and there is broad agreement among journalists (81 percent) that the news media did a poor job of reporting on the problem of terrorism prior to the attacks on September 11, 2001, including nearly four in ten (37 percent) who believed that the media did a very poor job.

What about coverage of issues in general? According to congressional staff members surveyed, the press is not doing a very good job. As survey findings presented in Chapter 5 indicate, 56 percent of congressional staff members believe that lack of media coverage on public affairs is making it harder for members of Congress to get media attention for their politically important activities.

A major critique of media in general and news media in particular is that they focus on matters that have little to do with the information voters need. “The majority of content in newspapers today is not anything that can be considered ‘news,’” writes Picard.<sup>84</sup> “About two-thirds of most newspapers is advertising, and of the remaining editorial matter only about 15 percent is news; the remaining is lifestyle material devoted to topics such as fashion, automobiles, entertainment, homes, sports, and so on.” So, as James Hamilton argues, “[in the United States] since the 1970s news coverage has shifted to an increasing emphasis on what people want to know and away from information that they may need as voters.”<sup>85</sup> This shift may be producing a paradox, if, as Thomas Patterson argues, the focus on “infotainment” and negative cynical news invites the potential audience to turn away from news entirely.<sup>86</sup>

### *Function Three: Scrutinize*

The third function of the press is that of watchdog over the exertion of power. Watchdog journalism is defined by W. Lance Bennett and William Serrin as: “(1) independent scrutiny by the press of activities of government, business, and other public institutions, with an aim toward (2) documenting, questioning, and investigating those activities, in order to (3) provide publics and officials with timely information on issues of public concern.”<sup>87</sup> This assumes that the press stands in for the public, not for corporations who own it, and it presupposes as well that the press is skeptical of claims of government—something demonstrably not true when the press as patriot emerges.

Journalists are aware of their own shortcomings as a watchdog. For example, when asked, “How good a job has the news media done of reporting on the Bush administration’s justification for war in Iraq?” a majority of journalists (59 percent) said that the news media had done a poor job. In fact, a little over a fourth of the journalists surveyed (26 percent) said that the press had done a very poor job. These beliefs are dependent on political ideology. Conservative journalists (57 percent) were much more likely than liberal reporters (29 percent) to say that the media did a good job of reporting the Bush administration’s justification for going to war in Iraq. Journalists who worked for local news outlets were more positive than national journalists—those who did most of the reporting of the administration’s justifications for war. Only a third (33 percent) of the national journalists said they did a good job, compared to 46 percent of the local journalists who said the media did a good job.

Like the informing function, the watchdog function is driven by a notion of objectivity. Much of the information provided to the public is a product of watchdog journalism. Everyday reporting of government happenings and documentation of other political events is watchdog journalism. However, the notion of the press as a watchdog connotes the scrutiny of public institutions and the uncovering of scandal or exposing of hidden activities of government officials and institutions.

Press performance of the watchdog role has come under criticism because of the press’s seeming incapacity to pursue critical questions or follow up on controversial stories in a timely fashion. Others have criticized the press for stylizing investigative reporting in the form of television news magazines and adopting an overall cynical tone in reporting.<sup>88</sup> Many of these stories dressed as investigative reporting have little consequence.

Some question the watchdog metaphor and argue that it undermines the public’s confidence in the press. A study by Paula Poindexter, Don Heider, and Maxwell McCombs found evidence that the public expects the local newspaper to be a good neighbor instead of a watchdog and would like to see more news coverage on education, health and medicine, and arts and culture.<sup>89</sup> Those who more strongly expect the local newspaper to be a good neighbor feel that television news—not the newspaper—is better suited to handle the role of the watchdog. Poindexter and her colleagues note, “This good neighbor–watchdog dichotomy may be one of the keys to understanding the reason behind the public’s increasing disaffection with the press.”<sup>90</sup>

### *Function Four: Represent*

The presumption of a free press is that it stands in for the public. The marketplace-of-ideas notion presupposes that the agora is open to all points of view, and that in the clash of competing ideas the public has the wherewithal to make good judgments. All of that is called into question “if commercial media enterprises

constrain the marketplace by their size and activities, by limiting who may introduce ideas and information, and by the range and scope of ideas, information, and discussion available.”<sup>91</sup> “In the twentieth century, the United States was the only country to develop a primarily commercial broadcasting system.”<sup>92</sup> That fact adds to the democratic press equation two elements missing in many other countries: the profit motive and corporate interest.

The press cannot represent the public if it protects the interests of the corporations that own it anymore than the detached press can protect the public if it is a partisan mouthpiece. The basis for concern here is simple. In 2006, five conglomerates owned most U.S. mass media. The interests of those corporations and their owners played an increasing role in American political culture. The big five—Time Warner, Disney, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, Viacom, and General Electric—own much of the media in the United States and, as a result, for practical purposes control much of what the American public learns or doesn’t learn through media about politics and government.

Because corporations owe their allegiance to their shareholders, their purpose is not serving the public good unless doing so is compatible with the creation of profit margins attractive to shareholders. “Today the business of news is business not news. . . . News has become secondary, even incidental, to markets and revenues and margins and advertisers and consumer preferences,” concluded a 2001 study of publicly owned newspapers.<sup>93</sup>

Consolidation has produced a reduction in the number of people editing and reporting news. The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s report on the state of journalism in 2004 found, for example, twenty-two hundred fewer full-time editorial employees at newspapers since 1990 and a third fewer correspondents at the networks than in the 1980s.<sup>94</sup> Among other things, that meant an increase in the workload of the remaining employees and a cut in the number of foreign bureaus.

After all is said and done, the desire to achieve profit is a driving force behind news media organizations. Is the profit motive incompatible with the democratic functions examined here? Logically, these two components of news media organizations must conflict from time to time. Most obviously would be a journalist’s commitment to objectivity and the revenue generated from advertising. A simple example clearly illustrates this tension: A newspaper journalist finds out that some unfavorable political and business dealings are being practiced by the newspaper’s advertising client. The tension between the watchdog role and the need for revenue would surely have some influence on what is reported and how the information is framed.

Journalists are aware of this tension. When asked on the Annenberg Media survey what role the pressure to make a profit should play in journalistic decisions in a news organization, a slight majority (53 percent) said that profit pressures should not influence news decisions at all. Although a majority of



journalists were shown to feel this way, it is by no means a consensus. The need to generate revenue is salient. A sizable number of journalists (31 percent) said that profits should have a small influence, and 16 percent of journalists thought that profits should have a moderate or great influence on journalistic decisions. Political ideology does play a role in journalists' views on the optimum influence of profits. Journalists who are self-described conservatives were more likely to accept the profit motive (28 percent) than liberals (12 percent) or moderates (16 percent).

Even though a slight majority of journalists believe that profit pressures should not have an impact, the influence of such pressures is felt by journalists. More than two-thirds (68 percent) said that profit pressures greatly or moderately influenced journalistic decisions. Roughly one-fourth (26 percent) said that the pressure affects news decisions to a small extent, and only a handful of journalists (4 percent) said that the pressure does not influence decisions at all. Interestingly, executives were more likely than staff journalists, editors, and producers to perceive the effect as small or absent. This worrisome finding suggests that the information the public receives is not solely dependent on attempts at objectivity—providing truthful accounts of the day's events—but is to some extent dependent on the commercial business needs of media outlets.

When the Annenberg Media survey asked the journalists about specific effects of profit pressures, over two-thirds agreed that these pressures have reduced the number of stories that take time and money to report. The kind of journalism most likely to be sacrificed in cutbacks of staff and bureaus is watchdog journalism. Investigative work is time- and resource-intensive.

Along these same lines, 56 percent of the journalists surveyed said that profit pressures had increased the number of “quick-and-dirty stories.” This may also be due to the fact that profit pressures have led to cutbacks in the number of reporters and editors, without corresponding cutbacks in workload (84 percent of the journalists polled agreed that such was the case). These data suggest that the protector of the public good, the press, is increasingly comprised of overworked, undersupported reporters who may not be able to pursue the stories that increase governmental accountability.

The American public also expresses concern about the influence of profit pressures on the news it receives. A little under three-fourths of the public (72 percent) believe that the quality of news is hurt by news organizations' efforts to make a profit. Seventy-nine percent of those surveyed felt that news media companies that receive substantial advertising revenue from a company would hesitate to report negative stories about that company. However, when focused on the motivations of the journalist as an individual, the public is split, with 49 percent believing that journalists are motivated mainly by the desire for financial and professional success and 42 percent holding that the journalists' main motivation is to inform the public.

Another characteristic of the commercial structure of the press is the increasing corporate mergers and acquisitions of newspapers and television stations. Beginning in the mid-1990s, many locally owned newspapers and television stations were bought by larger corporations or diversified companies. The impact of such buyouts is a cause of concern for many journalists. Specifically, two-thirds of the journalists surveyed believed that the quality of the news suffered because most news organizations were owned by large corporations. Similarly, 68 percent of the journalists surveyed felt that buyouts of locally owned newspapers by larger chains had a negative impact on the quality of news. Journalists (72 percent) believed that concentrated ownership reduces the number of different voices and views the American people hear each day. Executives (46 percent) were less likely to feel this way than staff journalists (79 percent) and editors and producers (69 percent).

Even though journalists believe that corporate ownership has a negative effect on the quality of news, a little under half (49 percent) of the journalists surveyed thought that corporate owners strive to provide factual and timely news, but business realities sometimes get in the way. Thirty-six percent of journalists expressed the belief that corporate owners are more concerned with profit than with providing news, and 12 percent felt that making a profit is the top priority of corporate owners.

What all of this suggests is that journalists, as well as the public, are very aware of the negative influence of profit pressure and corporate media ownership. The ability of the press to meet its democratic responsibilities is clearly limited by the commercial structure of news media systems. Newsmakers are conscious of these limitations and the American public fears that the quality of the information it receives from the press is compromised by profit pressures. Moreover, journalists believe that corporate ownership is limiting the diversity of opinions and the number of voices that are represented in the news.

In sum, due to the commercial structure of the news media, the press cannot completely fulfill its function to provide a marketplace of ideas where all sides of an issue are presented and debated. Consequently, the American public is left with less than ideal tools for democratic participation.

### *Public Perceptions and Press Censorship*

If informing, setting the national agenda, scrutinizing those in power, and standing in for the public to facilitate debate are important ways in which the marketplace of ideas is sustained in a democracy, then we should worry when these functions are not performed as well as they might be. But additional cause for concern can be seen in the possibility that those who believe the press is defaulting on its informing role are more likely to favor censoring the press in a time of heightened national security.

Making this argument requires that we step back for a moment and set the historical context by arguing that in times of war, whether hot or cold, the public becomes more receptive to government censorship of the press, and the government becomes more disposed to muzzle the “fourth estate.”

So, for example, in the Sixty-Fourth Congress in 1917 the House passed a piece of legislation that would become the Espionage Act, which included a provision advocated by President Woodrow Wilson that punished anyone who “shall collect, record, publish, or communicate . . . information relating to the public defense calculated to be, or which might be, useful to the enemy.” After an outcry by the press, the provision was stripped from the Senate version of the bill by a single vote. As the bill moved into the conference process, President Wilson sent a letter to Congress asserting that “authority to exercise censorship over the press to the extent that that censorship is embodied in the recent action of the House of Representatives is absolutely necessary to the public safety.” The Senate version prevailed and the censorship provision failed to become law. Wilson persisted. The next year he pressed for passage of amendments to prohibit “profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government.” This provision became law in the form of the Sedition Act in May 1918. Under the Espionage and Sedition Acts, U.S. newspapers deemed favorable to Germany were punished; socialist papers were banned from the mails. The acts went off the books in 1921 when Congress, now unaffected by war fervor, failed to renew them.<sup>95</sup>

Consistent with the notion that the press comes under attack in times of threat or war, in January 2006 President George W. Bush claimed that America’s enemies in the war on terror had been aided by a *New York Times* investigative report showing that the administration had authorized wiretaps of U.S. citizens without court order. This attack on the press occurred in a context in which the public was more disposed than it would otherwise have been to tolerate press censorship.<sup>96</sup>

An April 30, 2006, *New York Times* article observed that the press was operating in “a judicial climate that seems increasingly receptive to constraints on journalists.”<sup>97</sup> At a time when *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller was jailed for refusing to reveal a source, public support for government censorship of the press could be seen as having serious consequences concerning the balance of power between journalists and the state. And perceptions of press failures did not help matters. Perceptions of press performance coupled with the war on terror produced a troubling finding in spring 2005, when the Annenberg Media survey was fielded. Those who believed that the press covers up serious errors rather than correcting them were more likely to believe that the government has the right to censor the press in the war on terror. Conservatives and those with lower levels of education were also more likely to hold this view. In other words, one consequence of public perception that the press fails to perform its informing function may well be a willingness to restrict its First Amendment rights in times

of war or threat. This willingness is amplified during certain times of crisis that may cause an increased surge of patriotism, or a “rally ’round the flag effect”<sup>98</sup> when citizens are more likely to blindly support policies that may impinge on the basic rights afforded by the Constitution.

As for the public’s willingness to censor the press, trust in government is directly related to support for government censorship. This finding is not limited to the public. Trust in government was positively related to support for government restriction on the press in the Annenberg Media survey sample of journalists as well.

On the other hand, individuals who trust the news media are less likely to support government restrictions on the press. Over two-thirds of the public (78 percent) said that they trust the news media a great deal or a fair amount to operate in the best interests of the American people.

### Notes

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25. Thirty-eight percent of the journalists surveyed believed that journalists' accepting information without verifying it is the single most important reason bias slips into reporting. Twenty-nine percent of journalists stated that "strong personal views" is the single most important reason for bias in news reports, and 18 percent credited bias to tight deadlines.
26. National newspapers were selected for the Annenberg survey from the top twenty newspapers ranked by circulation in the *2004 Editor & Publisher International Year Book* and included the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*.

National broadcast organizations include the national television networks, major national cable television networks, public television, and radio chains with Washington, D.C., bureaus. Local newspapers were selected from the top one hundred local newspapers ranked by circulation, excluding those selected for the national sample, and an additional sample of local newspapers ranked from 101 to 350 in circulation.

Local television stations were selected from the top fifty media markets and from the fifty-one to one hundred top markets as defined by Nielson Media Research in 2004. Local radio stations were selected from the top fifty markets as well.

The primary sampling frame for media owners and executives, editors and producers, and staff journalists with each of these organizations was the Leadership Directories' *2005 News Media Yellow Book*. Secondary sampling frames included

*Bacon's MediaSource, Editor & Publisher International Year Book, and Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook.*

Respondents were selected using a two-stage sampling procedure. In the first stage, a random sample was drawn of media organizations. In the second stage, random samples of individuals were drawn by title—owners and executives, editors and producers, and staff journalists—from these organizations. In addition, a random sample of journalists who publish online was drawn. A total of 673 journalists were interviewed.

27. James Curran, "What Democracy Requires of the Media," in *The Press*, ed. Overholser and Jamieson, 128.
28. To Curran's focus on blogs we add partisan political talk radio of the sort practiced by Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity on the right and Al Franken on the left.
29. Hallin and Giles, "Presses and Democracy," 7.
30. Curran, "What Democracy Requires of the Media," 130.
31. Quoted in Gail Russell Chaddock, "Their Clout Rising, Blogs Are Courted by Washington Elite," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 27, 2005.
32. Pew Internet and American Life Project, *The State of Blogging*, January 2005, [www.pewinternet.org/reports\\_archive.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/reports_archive.asp).
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York, 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A republic divided / the Annenberg Democracy Project.

p. cm.—(Institutions of American democracy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-532527-0

1. United States—Politics and government—2001— 2. Democracy—United States—Public  
opinion. 3. Separation of powers—United States—Public opinion. 4. Public opinion—  
United States. I. Annenberg Democracy Project.

JK275.R47 2007

320.973—dc22

2007000240

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

